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North Korea: The Politics of Food Aid

by Jon Bennett

Abstract

The uniquely difficult political climate for international assistance to North Korea has sometimes distracted from the fact that people in the country are suffering for lack of basic essentials, not least food. The government has reluctantly admitted to the crisis, entering into an uneasy pact with humanitarian agencies for the first time in modern history. Evidence suggests that humanitarian assistance over the past three years – notably the World Food Programme's (WFP) largest emergency programme in its history – has been of positive benefit to those most vulnerable to countrywide food deficits. Nevertheless, North Korea presents an acute dilemma for humanitarians determined to uphold minimum standards of accountability. The government has consistently failed to provide adequate information about, and access to, the populations of concern. The clash of cultural norms and the deep distrust of foreign intervention does not facilitate the requirements for transparency and donor accountability.

North Korea is technically still at war with the South. The country also faces rapid economic decline. Responses to the humanitarian crisis are therefore mixed with a strategic interest in 'soft-landing' reform of the last of the great Stalinist states. Meanwhile, humanitarians face a familiar paradox: how to import huge quantities of food and other commodities to stabilise a volatile region whilst ensuring internationally acceptable levels of accountability.

In advocating minimum humanitarian principles, what kind of leverage do aid agencies have in countries where such principles are either misunderstood or simply not high priority? The implicit assumption behind such principles is that they will be universally promoted across the whole spectrum of international organisations as well as being backed by sanctions (withholding assistance, for instance). That this has not yet been the case in North Korea points not only to a weakness in coordination but also to a relativist position which sees these principles as being either culturally inappropriate or too hastily advanced. For some, the remarkable accommodation of foreign aid agencies in the past three years should not be threatened by seemingly intractable debates over transparency – the preoccupation of the givers rather than the receivers. For others, it is time to impose stricter measures of accountability, lest our hitherto lenient position with the North Korean authorities becomes an institutional standard in the country. One thing is certain: by 1999 – 1 million tonnes of food aid later – the acute phase of the North Korean emergency was already over. Are we, once again, worrying about standards in retrospect, locking the stable after the horse has bolted?

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North Korea
CHINA
NORTH HAMGYONG
Chongjin
RYANGGANG
CHAGANG
NORTH KOREA
SOUTH HAMGYONG
NORTH PYONGAN
Sinpo
Hungnam
SOUTH PYONGAN
Sea of Japan
Pyongyang
KANGWON
NORTH HWANGHAE
SOUTH HWANGHAE
Panmunjon
KAESONG
SOUTH KOREA
Seoul
Yellow Sea

1

Political and Economic Context

The link between international aid and political interest is nowhere more apparent than in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (henceforth referred to as North Korea). Conventional thinking places Kim Jong-Il's regime in the top 10 most volatile nations. The need for rapid reform to avoid inter- or intra-state conflict is glaringly obvious, especially to those concerned with the country's rising nuclear potential and the threat to regional security. Current political engagement with North Korea rests on two major issues: the resumption of four-party talks between the US, North and South Korea and China, aimed at brokering a permanent peace to formally end the 1950–53 Korean war, and the halting of missile and other military hardware exports. The continuation of the US food aid programme has been made contingent upon the resumption of the peace negotiations. Washington's contribution of 300,000mt (metric tonnes) to the WFP emergency programme in September 1998 came at a time when North Korea was stalling over the time-tabling of future talks.[1]

In 1994 the US, fearful of North Korea's rising nuclear status in the sub-continent, made a deal to 'buy out' its nuclear potential by giving it fuel oil and light water reactors to replace riskier heavy water plants. Also, tensions have recently risen due to North Korea's firing of a missile over Japan into the Pacific on 31 August 1998 and the allegations that Pyongyang has sold nuclear devises to Pakistan, thus further stalling negotiations on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). If India and Pakistan now sign the CTBT, as seems likely, the only missing signature out of 44 countries with civil nuclear programmes will be that of North Korea.

The nature of the regime led by the 'great leader' and founder Kim Il-Sung (who died in 1994 but was made president for all time in 1998) seems set to continue under his son Kim Jong-Il. Intolerance of internal dissent and external scrutiny tend to turn the discussion of food shortages in the country into a political debate, as was the case in communist countries earlier this century (notably the Soviet Union in the 1930s and China in the 1960s). Some have argued for clear parallels between these historical famines and the situation in North Korea: polite distrust of foreigners, defensive denial by government officials, and an all-embracing ideology of stubborn self-sufficiency (Lautze, 1997). The fear of extreme famine beneath a veneer of normality haunts those who passionately advocate for mass food inputs. Yet comparisons

with other 'communist' famines this century are not wholly appropriate. Unlike Stalin and Mao, Pyongyang does admit – albeit reluctantly – that it has a problem and invites external help. The terrible famines of the Soviet Union and China both occurred within 15 years of their respective revolutions, a result of brutal and misguided collectivisation. By contrast, North Korea's collectivisation took place 40 years ago. As one author has noted, 'what is happening now looks more like the death throes of a communist system than its forcible early consolidation' (Foster-Carter, 1997).

State and society in North Korea can only be understood with reference to the *juche* (self-reliance) philosophy and the extent to which the ruling Korean Workers' Party (KWP) has endeavoured to inculcate this philosophy in all areas of public life, economy and culture. Essentially, it is a policy of national self-reliance. Unlike the Soviet model, which stressed productive capacity as a base for socialism *juche* is based on individual capacity, creativity and responsibility, albeit under the guidance of central leadership. Ideologically, it supplemented and increasingly supplanted Marxist-Leninism. North Korea was the only communist state to remain neutral in the Sino–Soviet disputes of the 1980s. Active in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), it succeeded in excluding South Korea from the NAM because of the presence of US troops (of whom 37,000 remain today). There have been no foreign troops stationed in North Korea since 1959 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 1998).

Although it has proven a highly effective mobilising call for a beleaguered population, the much-vaunted *juche* philosophy does not bear close scrutiny at economic level. Food production, even at the best of times, depended heavily on fuel subsidies and related technologies throughout 40 years of close relations with neighbouring communist states. The sudden cut-off in Soviet aid and trade in 1991 led to a sharp decline in economic fortune. The country is still dependent to a large extent on assistance from China and South Korea, though it is in constant war alert with the latter. In 1996 its income per capita was a mere US$719 compared to US$10,000 in South Korea.

The North Korean economy shrunk 30 per cent between 1990 and 1996. Russia and China now require payment at world market rates in hard currency for their exports rather than the previous barter exchange, soft currency options and grant schemes. Agricultural production from 1990 onwards experienced negative growth, mainly because of a high dependency on agrochemical imports which the country could no longer afford. In an attempt to raise production levels marginal land has been increasingly cultivated, making the sector even more vulnerable to climatic shocks.

Political Power

There are three main hierarchies of power: the state, party and army. Government officials and technocrats resent the party's perks and its resistance to reform yet both ultimately defer to the military, who not only run their own economy but also seem to have at least veto power over general government policy. Probably the most powerful body is the least known: the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the ruling KWP. The country remains highly militarised. In a population of 24 million, 1.2 million men and women are under arms, mostly deployed close to the demilitarised zone near the 38th Parallel, the division between North and South Korea. Military rhetoric occasionally translates into usually unsuccessful forays across the border. Meanwhile, missile development is considered, particularly by Japan, a principle security threat. North Korea also barters improved Scud missiles to Iran and Syria in exchange for oil; trade that enables the military to maintain its own hidden economy.

The real possibility of either war and/or a proliferation in arms sales and the resulting instability is a 'worst case' scenario. The Pyongyang regime may use its still dominant military capacity as its only remaining incontestable claim to power. The army is inevitably a prioritised sector of the population, yet it has also been a key component in the production and distribution of food to civilians and in providing labour for reconstruction projects. Those who argue for a strict division of army and civilians in the distribution of food misunderstand the political and socioeconomic nature of North Korea as a country on permanent military alert where hundreds of thousands of civilians are under temporary conscription. The demilitarisation of the country is a long-term prospect contingent upon economic (and food) security.

Political Context of Food Aid

In examining North Korea's food shortages and their effect on the population from the little knowledge that we have, some key indicators should be born in mind:

- The current food crisis has structural causes, including economic mismanagement made worse by a decline in subsidised trade with erstwhile political friends in China, the old Soviet Union and elsewhere. The natural disasters of 1995 and 1996, though severe, merely highlighted structural failure; they were indicative rather than causal.

- North Korea is, unlike most Asian countries, highly urbanised. About 61 per cent of the total population live in towns and cities (2.7 million in Pyongyang). Only about 20 per cent of the national territory is arable land, and until the recent crisis the bulk of the nation's staple food was provided by cooperative farms on which 2.6 million farmers and their families live.

- Until the 1980s, with foreign subsidies for cheap fuels and fertilisers, North Korea was able to be self-sufficient in food production in spite of a small agrarian sector. This is now unsustainable and efforts are underway to persuade the government to open its economy to cash crop alternatives and exportable industrial output.

- By the late 1980s North Korea had become a predominantly non-agricultural and urbanised economy. Household level food self-sufficiency therefore is simply not an option for most North Koreans, though there is evidence of a growing informal economy which creates some alternatives to state-controlled food supplies.

- A large percentage of North Korea's human and productive resources are directed to the maintenance of one of the world's largest armies which is kept on constant war alert. Despite recent engagement in widescale agricultural production, the maintenance of the army and its related labour force creates a strain on the country's food resources and detracts from alternative economic investment. Aid agencies have been unable to determine whether food aid is diverted but the fact that the government gives priority to the military and favours urban areas makes this an issue of continuing concern.

- As the economy has contracted the centralised political system has become less tolerant of initiative and decentralisation; there has been a closing of ranks at the top. An appeal to ideological vigilance in the countryside masks the reorientation of priorities to the city and to the party faithful. Although undoubtedly the urban population is worst affected by food shortages (mainly because they do not have significant personal land plots and, unlike those on cooperative farms, cannot take advantage of a bulk food allocation at harvest time) there is concern that decisions about food and other forms of aid made in Pyongyang exclusively reflect urban priorities without taking into account particular needs of geographically remote areas.

- However, this political hegemony is in marked contrast to the necessity for some provincial authorities, especially in outlying areas, to make their own arrangements for the supply of essential goods due to the gradual breakdown of the centralised distribution system. This includes trade across borders, barter arrangements, etc.

- The North Korean government continues to acknowledge the breakdown of its distribution networks which results in severe shortages at household and institutional levels. The Public Distribution System (PDS), through which all basic foods are provided to the population, is under severe strain. It used to be a highly sophisticated multi-tiered system of subsidised food allocations related to the demands of work. However, poor crop yields, lack of fuel and overall food deficits have distorted the PDS in favour of certain population groups. During the pre-harvest months of April to October in the last three years the PDS has virtually closed.

- The accumulated anecdotal evidence of UN, donor and NGO missions points to uneven access to public food rations resulting in long-term nutritional deficits and pockets of serious malnutrition compounded by poor distribution. Indicators of famine as such cannot be verified.

2

International Humanitarian Assistance to North Korea

In contrast to famine in Africa, where state disintegration and a weakening of civil society are often the norm, North Korea is characterised by stability, centrality and civil order. Social control permeates all aspects of society; there is no 'civil society' association which is not state run and information is closely guarded. The current humanitarian crisis has emerged in a fully mature Stalinist polity in which the notion of 'humanitarian space' is alien. Decades of receiving bilateral aid donations as a form of political patronage have made North Korea ill-prepared for the kind of close monitoring required by operational agencies whose presence is, at best, regarded as a temporary necessity. The Pyongyang authorities have made it quite clear that the dollar value of aid is more important than the process of delivery.

From Natural to Complex Emergency

Humanitarian assistance was first requested to alleviate food shortages exacerbated by floods in 1995 and 1996 (plus regional droughts of 1997). By 1998, such assistance was still provided under the guise of flood relief, with the Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee (FDRC) remaining the main point of contact for aid agencies. The UN officially designated North Korea as a complex emergency in October 1997, yet the conditions for a more strategic approach to a complex humanitarian crisis – monitoring, reporting, logistics, standards and coordination – remain elusive. For example, agencies simply do not know the level and nature of internal discussions on food shortages in the country. Lower officials must adhere to social and economic targets set by Pyongyang. Reporting systems, including those referring to food aid distribution, reflect this highly centralised approach. It is not certain, therefore, that information passed from provincial and district officials to central government is reliable.

After only three years of international assistance the shock entry of the humanitarian aid industry is still being felt. The operational climate for UN and NGOs alike is difficult, yet there has been a notable opening up of the country to international inspection. In particular, the recent UNDP-sponsored Agricultural Recovery and Environmental Protection (AREP) inter-agency initiative (detailed later) is evidence that North Korea is slowly accommodating international interests and presence and has implicitly recognised the structural nature of the food crisis.

Prior to the recent food shortages and the now twice-yearly FAO/WFP crop and food assessments, the most reliable socioeconomic information available to humanitarian agencies was in the form of macro-indicators from research undertaken by UNDP in particular. It was inevitable that once the humanitarian agencies began responding to nutritional and health needs from 1995 onwards, they would demand micro-level socioeconomic indicators hitherto unavailable. For North Korea, extraordinary concessions have been made in this respect yet, understandably, agencies continue to be disappointed. Areas where requests have been denied include general access to government facilities, including warehouses and institutions where food is being distributed; random access to populations to assess the impact of food inputs; access to and reliability of available data; and a degree of scientific data such as nutritional surveys to underpin large-scale food aid programmes.

Very few outside observers have equated the lack of information with unacceptable levels of corruption. Although there may be serious questions over food distribution priorities, no evidence has emerged to suggest that food or medical aid is being diverted on a significant scale. Moreover, notwithstanding highly speculative assertions of mass famine coming from some NGOs, few have questioned the underlying necessity for international assistance for a number of years to come. Although the Pyongyang regime should be pressed for greater transparency, the cumulative evidence of field observations may be more important than the blind alley of exhaustive verification and 'scientific proof' of malnutrition (Smith, Hazel, 1998).

Health Issues

Official government health statistics are often presented as an affirmation of political success over several decades – and indeed, they are impressive when measured in this manner. Average life expectancy rose from 38.4 during the 1936–40 period, to 74.3 in 1986. The number of hospital beds per 10,000 of the population increased from 1.2 in 1936–40 to 135.9 in 1986 (Pang Hwan Ju, 1987, cited in Smith, Hazel, 1998). UNICEF reports that in 1998 there were 777 county hospitals, with 6,249 Ri (rural, sub-district) hospitals and clinics, and 30 doctors per 10,000 people. Officials figures also reported that by the mid-1990s immunisation coverage for preventable diseases – diphtheria, measles, polio, tuberculosis, neo-natal tetanus – was almost 100 per cent (UNICEF, 1998).

Official figures nevertheless belie realities on the ground. The WHO stated that as a result of recent natural disasters and economic decline North Korea was facing 'extreme mental and physical health problems' (WHO, 1998). Children in particular were threatened not only by malnutrition and chronic stunting but also by acute respiratory problems and diarrhoea-related diseases. As many as four out of every 1,000 children under five died of these illnesses in 1997. Moreover, estimated infant mortality rose from 23 per 1,000 live births in 1991 to 55 per 1,000 in 1996 (UNICEF, 1998). The state of the health system is nowhere near as impressive as official figures suggest. Those designated as 'doctors' often have only basic training, and health reporting systems are barely functioning in some areas. A February 1998 joint-NGO CARITAS/Trocaire delegation that visited the towns of Nampo, Pyongyang and four counties in the southeastern province of Kanwon noted the 'complete lack of medical supplies available to provincial and county hospitals' (CARITAS/ Trocaire, 1998).

By 1997, the government was giving international agencies responsibility for providing health assistance in certain accessible provinces. The major geographical and functional coverage was given to UNICEF (some 38 per cent of all counties and districts), with major coverage also being provided by Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), Médecins du Monde (MDM) and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) (for details see Smith, Hazel, 1998). This, combined with the extensive food aid programme, was deemed to have averted major famine by mid-1998. It is now left to agencies to begin to examine the severe underlying structural problems in the country's health service.

The Operating Environment

The emergency food aid, health and related assistance programmes pursued by the UN and NGOs since 1995 are shaped by a number of common and interrelated factors which affect all actors in the field:

- International assistance, though requested by the government, is regarded as a temporary necessity and the presence of foreign aid

workers is closely monitored by the country's dominant security apparatus. Technical assistance is rarely welcomed; neither is it officially acknowledged that North Korea's crisis is chronic and structural, requiring of external advice and support.

- Agency presence, including staffing levels, is contingent upon the dollar value of its assistance. Operational protocols specifically reflect this and a drop in revenue/material input implies a request for staff to leave. Several NGOs have closed their programmes as a result of this stipulation.

- The issue of access and monitoring – and the extent to which agencies are prepared to compromise international standards in this respect – has plagued the aid programme. The latest casualty in this dispute is one of the largest operational NGOs in the country, MSF, which withdrew its team of 13 professionals at the end of September 1998 due to denial of access to sections of the population and a suspicion that Pyongyang was discriminately feeding children from families loyal to the regime.

- Local assistance programmes undertaken by NGOs in particular have gained the respect of local officials and have made some impact on an otherwise impervious sociopolitical system. However, these officials are often removed for being too cooperative with international agencies, not least because their superiors in Pyongyang have the most to loose from an exposure of weakness. Building long-term relationships with government partners is therefore difficult.

- Although never explicitly stated, international aid agencies are not regarded as apolitical bodies. Humanitarian assistance is perceived as infused with political intent. NGOs, in spite of their protests to the contrary, have often been seen as simply representing their country of origin.

- Although an unprecedented degree of flexibility and cooperation is evident in the recent willingness of North Korea to engage in debate with development agencies and international financial institutions (for example, through the UNDP Round Table), it is not yet clear whether this is a short-term tactic and part of the broader political alignments taking place at regional and international levels. In spite of its isolation, North Korea has historically been most adept at playing off regional and international governments against each other. Aid is undoubtedly a small part of a larger equation, and very susceptible to sudden changes in policy.

3

Food Security Assessment

National Deficits

In the absence of radical economic and agricultural reform, North Korea faces recurrent food supply difficulties; the country is almost certainly in terminal economic decline. Government statistics are usually treated with caution, and it has been notoriously difficult for donor governments to extract accurate information about what everyone agrees is a crisis. Food production figures are at best informed guesses, at worst purely speculative; in all cases, however, they are alarming. The primary source of information on food conditions on which governments rely are the FAO/WFP food and crop assessments. The assessments depend largely on government figures supplemented by site visits. As with all foreign missions in North Korea, visits are carefully managed and access to first-hand information is limited. Some contradictions have emerged between the FAO/WFP assessments and those done elsewhere. For example, in the run up to the 1997 harvest WFP warned of a 'grave food security situation developing' with a shortfall of 2.3 million mt. This contrasted markedly with reports from the Chinese Foreign Ministry that North Korea had, in the same period, managed to avert a major food crisis. At the same time South Korea's Unification Ministry estimated that by the end of August 1997 the combination of domestic stockpile and output (2.8–3 million mt) and aid (0.8–1 million mt) was sufficient to tide North Korea over to harvest. Conversely, the Korean Rural Economic Institute estimated a shortfall very close to the WFP figure. The FAO/WFP reports further stated that the majority of livestock had been culled because of the lack of feed from 1995 to 1997. This is a different version to that of the government which reported a loss of 237,000 head of cattle in the 1997 drought.

That Pyongyang has deliberately exaggerated data to attract food aid remains a possibility, though notoriously difficult to verify. One can only look at historical trends and patterns and raise questions accordingly. Certainly, consumption trends indicate that North Korea very quickly learned the value of foreign aid. From 1960 to 1985 grain imports consisted almost exclusively of wheat. Yet WFP figures for calendar years 1996 and 1997 show that food aid in the form of rice accounted for 17 and 24 per cent of total aid respectively. This rose to 31 per cent by mid-1998.

A recent analysis of food consumption patterns in North Korea is revealing (Smith, Heather, 1998).

The FAO/WFP crop and food supply assessments (nine missions from December 1995 to November 1998) are an established mechanism for informing the size and scope of the food aid programme. FAO/WFP assumed in their 1997 estimates that the per capita cereal (defined as rice, maize, wheat, millet, sorghum and barley) consumption accounts for approximately 75 per cent of total caloric intake. Yet FAO data sheets for the past four decades show a much lower share of caloric intake from cereals, averaging between 30 and 45 per cent. It may be that FAO/WFP underestimated the significance of other foodstuffs – pulses (beans) and starchy roots (potatoes, sweet potatoes) – in the North Korean diet; also fruit and vegetables account for almost one-third of total food consumption. Even FAO/WFP assumptions of 'minimum' consumption standards of rice and maize needed to sustain the population appear higher than those of the past.[2] They assume a per capita yearly consumption of cereals for 1996/97 of 167kg (100kg from milled rice, 67kg from maize). This is higher than any time in the past 36 years.

The concerns expressed here are important in several respects:

- they highlight the informational and methodological constraints in making accurate national food supply and caloric intake estimates;
- they suggest that a misleading picture results from concentrating only on one sub-set of the food balance sheet;
- they suggest that the provision of food aid in the form of rice and maize may have influenced the relative importance given to these commodities in government figures, not least because they are the 'controlled' commodities: that is, they are administered by the government through the PDS.

As domestic food production and productivity has declined it has been replaced, in part, by barter trade based on raw materials (forestry products, for example) which is both ecologically destructive and unsustainable. Problems are compounded by a high dependency on imported fertiliser and energy inputs. Soil fertility has declined due to monoculture and intensive farming, and climatic conditions not conducive to crop rotation. The only real hope is greater economic interaction with the international community and the adoption of reform measures aimed at addressing the country's balance of payments constraints.

Pyongyang's anachronistic approach to reform includes 'show piece' free trade zones which contrast starkly with makeshift attempts to adapt an industrial economy to greater food self-sufficiency. An example from the local press illustrates the length to which North Koreans are prepared to go to make ends meet.[3] The Pyongyang Rice Cleaning Centre is the country's largest grain polishing factory with an annual capacity of 100,000mt. It wears out two rubber rollers every week, but due to the shortage of hard currency has been unable to get new ones. Undaunted, in 1995 it discovered a way of making its own rollers by melting old tyres. The factory then removed the sheet iron from the factory roof (replacing it with tiles) and used it to make and repair equipment. Nothing is wasted in the factory. Leftover corn cores and rice husks are reused twice: mushrooms are grown on them (inside the machines), and the remains are fed to the factory's own pigs. Pig excrement is then fed to 15,000 fish in the centre's fishpond. An extraordinary tale of resourcefulness, apparently all done 'in accordance with the state's instructions'. Yet the story reveals massive failures of overall economic management and of resource allocation. Macro-vices have made such micro-virtues necessary.

Regional Solutions?

Perhaps the most telling factor in an analysis of food security at the macro level is the level of aid likely to come from neighbouring countries. Although there has been a drop in concessional trade with an increasing necessity for hard currency to acquire fuel, fertilisers and equipment, there remains the possibility that North Korea's economic survival will be assured by regional players. China and South Korea are Pyongyang's strongest guarantors against collapse. Hard currency settlement terms in Chinese–North Korean trade were officially drawn up in 1993, yet China is likely to continue to serve as a de facto concessional supplier of grain and fuel. For the period January 1995 through July 1998 (almost four years), China exported 1.85 million mt of cereal to North Korea. Of this 968,000mt were exported in 1997. Reportedly, China has incorporated into its current Six-Year Plan a provision to supply a minimum 500,000mt of grain, 1.3 million tonnes of crude oil and 2.5 million tonnes of coal each year until 2000 at very favourable concessionary rates (Smith, Heather, 1998).

The Public Distribution System

The PDS is the manner in which heavily subsidised food and other basic necessities (for example, domestic fuel) is rationed. It applies to all citizens; the only exception is families living on cooperative farms (about 37 per cent of the population) who receive an annual quota of food from the harvest. Surplus is then bought by the state for distribution through the PDS.

The rationing system consists of domestic food/fuel produce, imported goods and aid deliveries. Coupons issued at the workplace provide individuals with a set quota of staple grain which they can purchase, usually twice monthly, from county distribution centres. The subsidy itself is very large; for example, in 1996 rice was purchased by the state at 91chon/kg and sold through the PDS at 8chon/kg (chon is the local currency).

The PDS was, until recently, a highly sophisticated allowance system which depended on a person's age and the number of workpoints earned. Workpoints were allocated according to how strenuous the work was and by productivity. Managerial cadres also earned additional workpoints. Until late 1995 the PDS ration scale had 10 levels. When food production and availability reached crisis levels, it was modified to a new three-level system (based solely on age) which assumed that 75 per cent of people's dietary energy needs would be provided by staple grains.

The rationing system, including workpoints, has continued throughout the crisis and subsidised prices of commodities have remained more or less stable. However, the actual quantity of goods on the shelves of the county distribution centres has declined dramatically. From 1997 onwards the PDS has deteriorated to the extent that distribution has only been possible when international aid is available. Institute directors (hospitals, schools, etc) express increasing concern over when, and if, supplies will be forthcoming, and a certain amount of secret 'hoarding' is reported.

One can look at the PDS (and, indeed, the healthcare system) as a failed system (because it is corrupt and/or cannot be adequately supplied) or as a system adapting to realities (being 'localised', using coping mechanisms and the initiative of local managers). The distinction is important in terms of the strategy adopted by agencies. There is increasing evidence to suggest that the general strategy to rehabilitate the PDS through enhancing its supply may be misplaced for the production of food through market gardening and purchase through barter, for example, has already superseded the PDS as a main supplier of food to population.

In the event of rapprochement between North and South Korea, imports from the South and Japan, coupled with commitments from China, are likely to far outweigh future commitments of UN food aid. The huge gap that has opened up between the levels of development between North and South Korea give South Korea an overwhelming advantage in all but the military field, and even there the North's economic decline is taking its toll. One can speculate that the only parts of North Korean industry and agriculture likely to recover will be those supported by South Korean aid and investment – a potential dependency with far reaching implications. International aid agencies in North Korea are almost unanimous in feeling that in light of these developments the Pyongyang authorities will persist in putting obstacles in the way of assistance programmes simply because they are regarded as a temporary (and irritating) necessity; once a regular supply of (unmonitored) food aid is assured, there will be no further need for the UN or NGOs.

Famine Indicators

The usual indicators of famine – a rise in market prices of staple foods, sale of livestock, population displacement, etc – cannot be easily discerned in such a strict state run society. If present at all, these indicators are lagging rather than leading. Citizens may have little knowledge of conditions in neighbouring provinces and pockets of starvation would exist well before mass migration occurred.

Using per capita rationing is a poor means of gauging the true food situation for the general population for several reasons:

- the PDS (see box) has ceased to function effectively;
- although limited, enterprising PDS managers have managed to adapt the system to the advantage of their local populations including, for instance, local barter and developing their own system of helping those most vulnerable;
- there are different consumption patterns for urban and rural communities and those on the coast;
- targeted food aid is specific to (mostly) child-based institutes and has not had an impact upon those outside of the institutional networks.

Parts of the country, such as the coastline and some fertile segments along the Chinese border and Pyongyang, could remain relatively unscathed by the food shortages. The most vulnerable populations are likely to be those in the non-farm rural areas or relatively isolated regions such as Ryanggang Province which the government insists is supplied by maize donated by China, but where the PDS has entirely collapsed and aid agencies have had very limited access. The 'democracy' of distribution is under strain and it is no longer useful to talk in terms of nationwide equitable distribution. Rather, a more useful analysis would be based on micro-economic indicators at sub-province level.

The dilemma for aid agencies is that the government will not accept an investigation of food security in a general sense. To date, it has only accepted impact assessments of actual food donations limited to those institutions where food is distributed. Even household interviews in the vicinity have been stultifying affairs rendering little useful information. The challenge will be to persuade the government that preparedness and mitigation requires a broader set of data.

4

The Food Aid Programme, Distribution and Local Trade

The Size and Scope of WFP Assistance

From November 1995, WFP's emergency programme reflected a request from the government for direct assistance to flood-affected people and facilities. In the first three WFP emergency programmes, donor response was exceptionally good – the appeals were fully met and, in the case of the third (1997), exceeded. From November 1995 to December 1997, approximately 365,000mt of food commodities were delivered through WFP. Yet by 1997, its own experience and that of other operational agencies suggested that the response to natural disasters, while important in itself, could not address the more fundamental structural and systemic difficulties facing the country. The picture emerging was far more complex. It demanded a more strategic approach based on locating vulnerability while addressing the chronic failure of a national system of distribution. The food aid appeals shifted towards general distribution, targeting all child-based institutions throughout the country coupled with food for work programmes. By 1998, targeting became even more specific; here was a fully fledged national assistance programme to an entire population in distress. WFP's appeal for 1998, almost met by the end of the year, was an enormous 658,000mt.

Distribution Agreements

The FDRC (set up in August 1995) is the main interlocutor for WFP, NGOs and bilateral food donors delivering food assistance. The FDRC is a committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and as such is answerable to senior political and military authorities. Logistics (handling, storage, transportation and distribution to county level) is the responsibility of the Ministry of Food Administration (MFA; not to be confused with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). With the exception of the Ministry of Health, access to line ministries has been limited.

For each food aid shipment, coordinated through the WFP emergency operation, the following process takes place:

- A detailed distribution plan is drawn up and agreed between WFP and FDRC. This includes details of deliveries down to county and Ri levels as well as details of the target groups. For its part, WFP tries to ensure that the broad parameters of the project are met – including equitable geographical spread of commodities, targeting of identified vulnerable people, and the delivery of pre-arranged quantities.

Political Organisation of the State

There are three administrative levels of state apparatus:

- the central state machinery;
- the provincial or city level (there are nine provinces and three cities – Pyongyang, Nampo and Kaeson – which, due to their size, are also provinces in themselves; the free trade zone of Rajin-Sonbong in the northeast of the country also has province status, bringing the total number of 'provinces' to 13);
- county or district level (there are 210 counties).

Each province is sub-divided into units of either Ri (in rural areas) and Dong (in urban areas). These are organisational units only; they have no distinct political or administrative functions.

- After receipt at port, attended by a WFP port captain (or logistics officer in the case of rail freight at the China border), the central FDRC informs their local offices of movements.

- Each of the WFP sub-offices (five as at March 1998) are given the distribution plan for their region and usually check the arrival of consignments in as many county warehouses as they have access to. Monitoring capacity, especially in 1997, was limited but there were only very few occasions when consignments were not received as stated at least in those counties visited. Although such visits are pre-arranged, WFP has been able to request visits to any of the sites on the distribution plan at relatively short notice.

Trucking Limitations

It became clear in 1997 that fuel shortages and the government's trucking capacity could not sustain the massive increase in food aid imports without a substantial subsidy. WFP thus proposed a consignment note/transport subsidy system to offset some of the costs associated with taking food across the country. Since the government was not willing to give detailed data on transport capacity or costs, however, a rather arbitrary figure of $8/mt was arrived at. Understandably, given the extreme shortage of hard currency in the country, the government was very keen on the subsidy. The precondition was the new consignment note system which in theory meant that WFP would reimburse the FDRC upon presentation of data showing that food had, indeed, been delivered to all institutions on the distribution plan.[4]

Due to the fact that some 43,000 institutions were receiving WFP food there were inevitable bottlenecks in reporting, and completed consignment notes were sometimes taking up to four months to arrive on WFP's desk. Undoubtedly, many consignment notes were actually filled in Pyongyang – they never left the capital. The explanation could be that the FDRC simply could not fulfil its obligations as per its contract with WFP and, under pressure to release funds and save face, preferred to 'doctor' the system.

It should be recalled that (a) no random monitoring by WFP was allowed – visits are strictly limited and pre-arranged; (b) monitors were able to check only between 2 and 5 per cent of the total deliveries in 1998; (c) even at the peak of staffing numbers in early 1998 WFP had fewer than 15 international field monitors in country at any one time. Nevertheless, WFP is the only agency with sub-offices and staff numbers even able to attempt to track commodities consistently. If the government is stockpiling food aid or other commodities for use by favoured sectors of the population it does not need to do this with WFP commodities; so much other food aid, notably from regional states, is not monitored at all.

As a comprehensive means of verifying commodity deliveries the consignment note system was fundamentally flawed. At best it was simply a system of double checking the distribution plan against government figures and warehouse receipts. A sympathetic interpretation would suggest that the government tried its best to implement the system but language barriers, staff capacity and the introduction of an alien bureaucratic procedure were all too much. A less sympathetic interpretation might note that in other sectors the government has demonstrated its remarkable ability to control and report in detail all kinds of information it deems important. If the consignment note system did not concur with existing government reporting strictures, it was unlikely that these would be changed to accommodate WFP's requirements.

Private Trading and Coping Mechanisms

The PDS appears to be the only significant source of staple food for the population and in theory private trade in grain is illegal. However, since the PDS has provided a decreasing percentage of family needs over the last two years, 'private' trading has assumed greater importance. On collective farms each family is entitled to a home garden of 60–90m^2 which can, at best, provide 10–20 per cent of a family's food needs per year. Every 10 days or so there are peasant markets at which produce from private plots and/or livestock may be sold (including produce from people not on collective farms). In coastal areas people collect seaweed and fish, but fuel for boats is limited. In rural areas people collect wild vegetables and mountain herbs and roots. On some collective farms such foraging is organised through work teams.

In the towns and cities every available piece of land is used for growing food, though the amount of land per family is very small. Crop patterns on such plots have changed in the last two years; while in the past garlic, onions, chillies and other vegetables were grown, home gardens are now almost exclusively given over to maize and beans on poorer soil and maize and potatoes on richer soil. Though technically illegal, there has been increased tolerance of petty trading (consumer goods, snacks, drinks) in towns. If the ingredients are from the PDS, the profit margins can be huge. In theory, money itself does not give access to most foodstuffs since everything requires a coupon. However, the existence of petty trading suggests that there is an informal economy in which food can be bartered or purchased with money.

Coping mechanisms during food shortages are severely limited. People cannot move to other areas to sell their labour, although some have reported a greater tolerance of internally displaced people (Norwegian Refugee Council, 1998). Some families interviewed by Oxfam had regularly visited relatives on collective farms in the hope of buying additional food. The selling of individual assets for food is rare, though on a larger scale the state authorities have bartered timber, scrap metal and other goods with China.

A significant development is the processing of alternative foods in factories which have traditionally processed cereal. In the Pongsan Cereal Processing Enterprise, for instance, seaweed and soda were combined to produce 1,400kg of noodles per day which were then sold to workers in factories at the same price (8chon/kilo) as the PDS cereal. A similar enterprise was in operation in Pyongsong (South Pyongyang) where some 15 to 20mt of seaweed cakes were being produced in the city each day. The Pyongsong Enterprise for Cereal Administration facility, for example, produced 2 tonnes a day benefiting 500 families. Here, wet seaweed was delivered, washed, cooked and mixed with small quantities of corn soya blend (CSB), usually provided through aid organisations. A total of 2 kilos of cakes per person per three months was allocated, the distribution being carefully monitored and organised by the local factory staff at the factory gates.[5]

Seasonal Reductions in Distribution

In 1996, 1997 and 1998 FAO/WFP crop assessment reports (usually April and November) indicated a regular pattern of reduction in PDS allocations from January to March, followed by a complete cessation of distribution in many areas until the following harvest in November. Negligible contingency reserves are held in government warehouses. The six million farm workers and families are less affected by reductions since they receive a single annual instalment at the end of the harvest (corresponding to about 350 to 440gm/person/day in 1997/98). By contrast, urban dwellers without access either to standard instalments or relatively larger private land plots are badly hit by shortages (by March 1998 food rations were reduced to as little as 150gm/person/day). This pattern of seasonal deficit seems set to continue and is becoming increasingly recognised in official circles where alternative food processing is encouraged in state factories.

Local Negotiations

Meanwhile, aid agencies note the diligence of local PDS managers in their efforts to feed the population in their charge. Anecdotal evidence and discussions with these managers indicates that on occasion some have distributed food beyond the targeted child-based institutions; rather than abuse of the system, this may point to an additional targeting of particularly vulnerable families.

The idea of a monolithic government structure is brought into question when one looks at the high

degree of autonomy and control that some counties have over allocations made through the PDS. Aid agencies have gradually begun to appreciate that provincial level authorities may be relatively weak and more likely to negotiate conditions which they cannot ultimately deliver. Indeed, negotiating a PDS selection procedure with provincial authorities puts unnecessary strain on the bureaucracy. A more effective development, execution and monitoring of programmes will rely on relationships with relevant county authorities. This is especially true of longer term programmes (health, sanitation, food security) in which there is a vested interest at county level (or cluster of counties). Obtaining distribution lists and other information has been easier when dealing with more discreet units at this level. This is also true of targeting: by targeting well-defined Ris or individual counties it is easier to secure information. Some NGOs have found this also to be the case when selecting a single age group (narrower than 'those of kindergarten age').[6]

5

Access and Monitoring

The most contentious issue for all aid agencies in North Korea is that of access and monitoring. For three years a battle of wits has pitted national security imperatives and the fear of being overrun by foreigners against operational efficiency and aid accountability. The *juche* philosophy to a large extent informs this debate. North Koreans understand the necessity to monitor aid donations but suspect that they are being asked to accept donations for the purposes of monitoring.[7]

Apart from logistical constraints (limited government truck capacity, poor weather conditions in some provinces, and so on), monitoring for all agencies has been compromised by staff shortages (numbers limited by government), short-stay visas for international staff, and the fact that all visits have to be pre-approved by the government. By October 1997, WFP, for instance, had visited only 110 of the country's 210 counties.[8] Although WFP now has five sub-offices (Wonsan, Hamhung, Chongjin, Heysan and Sinuiju), for the most part these are actually hotel rooms, and difficult living conditions and short-term visas impede continuity among international staff.

The 'review' of the 1997 Consolidated Appeal stated that by the end of 1997 WFP had visited 73 per cent of the areas in which food had been distributed (OCHA, 1998). This does not mean 73 per cent of all institutions were monitored, for in most cases only a select few designated sites were visited. Moreover, in many cases they were visited only once.

According to the UN's 1998 Consolidated Appeal, WFP emergency officers from either a nearby sub-office or the Pyongyang main office meet regularly with local administration and FDRC officials. These meetings are an opportunity to use standard checklists to collect information on food movements, beneficiaries, utilisation, issues of acceptability and adequacy of storage. They are essentially an exchange of data whereby government officials compare their dispatch and receipt figures against the original distribution plan. They do not in themselves constitute monitoring, nor are they a means of evaluating the impact of food assistance.

Withholding of Food, May 1998

The issue of access reached a head in April 1998 when WFP Executive Director, Catherine Bertini, visited the country and warned the government that

the WFP would be forced to suspend operations in 50 of the country's 210 counties if the agency could not monitor food distribution. Although the government subsequently opened up a further 11 counties, 39 were left inaccessible. WFP decided to take a tough line: in May 1998 it scaled back its proposed operations by 55,000mt – approximately the amount of food allocated to those 39 counties. It was impossible to determine whether some WFP food commodities ultimately found their way to the closed counties. However, evidence gathered by monitors shows that higher amounts of food were sent to neighbouring counties which suggests that enterprising county PDS managers would have had the opportunity to bring food into at least some of the 'closed' areas.

Withholding 55,000mt appears to have not had the required effect. By October 1998, the number of inaccessible counties had risen to 65 (in other words WFP was only able to go to only 145 out of the 210 counties). This denial of access was explained as 'temporary' by the government (Reuters, 1998).

There are two areas of continuing concern for operational aid agencies however:

i. restricted and closely 'arranged' access to distribution sites;
ii failure of the government to provide a full listing of beneficiary institutions broken down by county and district which shows the number registered in each institution. The government has felt no obligation to provide a list of institutions as such and it only provides the number of those per county. Given the close marshalling of monitoring visits, this means that agencies can only guess at how representational such visits are and whether, for instance, those institutions are in areas where food shortages are most acute.

Staff Issues

Most international aid agencies have found that their field operations have been delayed or curtailed on several occasions due to their lack of authority over local staff. Local staff are wholly assigned/recruited by the government, with agencies reimbursing the basic salary and allowances. There is little opportunity to train local staff effectively given that their reporting loyalties are almost always towards the government.

All agencies must sign a Letter of Understanding (LOU) which outlines staff requirements in relation to the size of the programme. In 1997 WFP required 25–30 international staff per programme to oversee the import and distribution of approximately 334,000mt of food aid. At least 17 of these personnel were assigned to monitoring tasks. By September – halfway through the programme – only eight international WFP staff were in the country. Although this number increased to 14 by the end of the year, 'technical reasons' continued to delay visas and the dispatch of staff to the provinces. Other agencies fared little better: the EU had four monitors (based within WFP) and the US had five (one from each of the key agencies in the US PVO Consortium).[9]

In spite of these difficulties, WFP's 1998 programme doubled in size. The minimum number of staff requested to administer and monitor the projected import of 658,000mt of food was 46. By June 1998, 35 were in country (of which 15 were monitors). Core staff were generally not in contention; the sticking point was the number of monitors. The government had insisted (as it did with all agencies) that visas be granted commensurate with the level of food aid arriving in the country. By linking the number of international monitors to commodity arrivals a large degree of ambiguity was exploited by the government – not only did this contravene the LOU stipulation that staff should be in place prior to the arrival of the first shipment of food, but also no formula for staff/commodities was offered. The situation was further complicated by the fact that expatriate numbers were ultimately decided by government security agents with whom neither the UN nor NGOs had contact. Instructions in this regard were simply transmitted through the (subordinate) FDRC.

North Korean Ambassadors Abroad

International views on the continuing challenge of access and monitoring range from the sympathetic ('the government has moved a long way in three years to accommodate agency wishes') to hostile ('the government has no interest in external scrutiny and, indeed, may have something to hide'). Much of this debate has been reactive, based less on an ongoing discussion with North Korea authorities (which requires a longer time frame not enjoyed by most humanitarian agencies) and more on tentative speculation.

Some agencies have tried to insist on a more explicit LOU which includes penalty clauses for non-compliance. The North Koreans are, however, master poker players. A stand-off, with greater or lesser bargaining power on both sides, sometimes results in radical decisions (the WFP withdrawal of aid or, by contrast, expulsion of an NGO). More worrying has been Pyongyang's ability to negotiate terms through its ambassadors in Washington, Rome and Brussels – sometimes to the detriment of aid officials on the ground. The result has been a mismatch between conditionalities seen as vital for programme execution in Pyongyang and the more general political tenor of negotiations taking place in Europe and North America. Put plainly, the North Koreans know only too well that in the current political climate of détente in the peninsula, food aid will continue to come in spite of a less than satisfactory scrutiny. There is nothing in the behaviour of the main donors in the last three years to indicate otherwise.

6

Institutional Feeding and Nutrition Surveys

The large food aid programmes have mostly concentrated on the general distribution of rations to institutions for children. This has addressed two key concerns: the identification of a specific and defined population acknowledged as perhaps the most vulnerable to North Korea's food shortages and the manner in which the impact of food aid could be ascertained within a relatively stable and accessible sector. By mid-1997 it was time to press the government for a more rigorous analysis of the degree of nutritional deficiency experienced by children of a certain age, and use this data both as an indication of national needs and as a base line for future measurements of food aid impact. Standard practice demanded that such an analysis should be household based and statistically viable. Neither a random survey nor household access was allowed.

In 1997, the request for a random survey by an inter-agency team led by the WFP was rejected by the government. In response new protocol was drawn up with the considerably less ambitious objective of assessing the anthropometric status of children from 0–7 years attending government-selected nurseries and kindergartens in four provinces (Kangwon, South Hwanghae, South Pyongan and South Hamgyong).

The rejection of the random survey probably had little to do with the desire to manipulate figures for it was in the government's interest to reveal the true nature of food shortages. Rather, a combination of the political system, cultural pride and technical misunderstanding prevented discussion of anything other than strictly controlled data collection. Despite their disappointment, the nutrition team proceeded with the 'foothold' represented by the curtailed survey.

Food Crisis Hits Institutions: Nutrition Report, 1997

A May 1996 food and nutrition assessment by WFP noted that the government had thus far protected child nurseries from the effects of food shortages and that steady and adequate supplies continued through the 1995–96 winter months (WFP, 1996). Twelve months later the situation had deteriorated considerably: those very institutions protected by the state were now showing signs of malfunction in supply and provision.

A total of 42 nurseries and kindergartens (within 19 counties in five provinces) were measured in WFP's 1997 nutrition survey. Including a pre-test

sample of two institutions in North Hwanghae province, the total number of children surveyed was 3,965. The final report (WFP, 1997) concluded that more food is urgently needed to reduce malnutrition and that this food should be targeted at all children, not just those who are malnourished. This was a problematic exercise: the survey figures could not be extrapolated to country, province or even county levels and no information could be provided on household access to food, other resources and coping strategies. Furthermore, because the source of rice and maize for the institutions could have come from either food aid, provincial stocks or cooperative farms, and the institution directors could not have known which, it was not possible to assess the value of food aid for nurseries and kindergartens.

The data indicated an extraordinary variance in stunting rates (from 0.6 per cent to 74 per cent in the sample), underlining the fact that within the same institution there were severely malnourished and relatively healthy children. There is no understanding of why this is so. For the most part institution staff lack the technical know-how for dealing with specific malnutrition, and it is well-known that a general distribution of food without therapeutic care does not effectively address the issue of malnutrition.

In this regard it is instructive to cross-reference reports from other agencies working in the same areas and institutions as WFP. With ECHO funding, the British NGO Children's Aid Direct imported some 475,000kg of supplementary food items from September to December 1997. This was destined for 322 institutions in Sunchon City in South Pyongan, many of which were also WFP-targeted institutions. It appears that a certain amount of overlap in contributions occurred, though this was extremely difficult to either verify or rule out. Furthermore, although the food was earmarked as supplementary and should have been specifically for therapeutic feeding, it became clear that most of it, including an expensive consignment of 115,000kg of high energy milk (HEM), was used for general distribution. Due to its being used incorrectly, the HEM consignment was finally given to MSF. The relationships between supplementary feeding and general rationing were evidently not fully understood by institution staff (Children Aid Direct, 1998).

Assuming that priorities had not changed, one can only assume that malnutrition in child-based institutions was indicative of a broader crisis in food provision to the population and that vulnerability was particularly acute among the under fives. Nevertheless, international standards of accountability suggested extreme caution in engaging in a large-scale food aid programme to a country where the social and political context of shortages was so poorly understood.

The August 1997 nutritional survey was the first international attempt to gather comprehensive and countrywide data. Hitherto small, non-randomised samples of children had been measured by international agencies in which high rates of malnutrition were found and widely quoted (for example a World Vision survey of five children's centres). These figures were of extremely limited value and may have been the source of misinformation when extrapolated to the general population. The official government figure for malnutrition among the under-fives was 37 per cent, though by their own admission no representational survey had been conducted and, in any case, it is unclear whether this figure refers to wasting, stunting or underweight children; data from the growth monitoring system is not analysed at central level.

Information Anomalies

Apart from the issue of technical competence in theraputic feeding, the data collection further revealed some pressing questions: why were so many children absent from the institutions at the time of the visit? Was there a link between being an orphan and being poorly fed and, if so, did this point to more effective coping strategies for those with families? Worse still, were children of political dissidents and orphans subject to discriminatory treatment and access to food? One should note that this was precisely the charge made by MSF France in their withdrawal from the country in September 1998. The fact that the survey team was not able to ask such questions and had no access to hospitals to discover the extent and effectiveness of referral systems and healthcare for malnourished children means that any conclusions drawn from the data would be highly speculative. What is clear, however, is that North Korea's children – officially designated 'jewels of the nation' – are not exempt from the kind of political priorities aid agencies have barely been able to fathom.

Further light is shed on the issue of orphans and child nutrition from reports issued by MSF France

in September 1998. As made clear above, MSF withdrew due to continuing frustration over information and access to its target population. It had, in the previous year, provided assistance to 1,400 health centres and hospitals in four provinces serving a population of seven million people. Targeted assistance included the provision of therapeutic feeding and medical care to about 14,000 children. In one province, South Pyongan, MSF estimated that about a quarter of the children were orphans or abandoned. Many were picked up from the street by government authorities and placed in institutions to which access was denied to foreign visitors. Meanwhile, the Pyongyang authorities deny that homeless children exist. MSF contends that these children are not receiving adequate medical or nutritional attention and that, furthermore, they are victims of a discriminatory allocation of food which goes to populations loyal to the government. Meanwhile, negotiations over a new LOU with MSF had stalled, with the Ministry of Health insisting that the agency simply provide pharmaceutical raw materials rather than targeted healthcare.

MSF is particularly concerned that the number of children they see in the centres is less than 1 per cent of the estimated under-five population. They therefore cannot know how representative this sample is of the levels of malnutrition in the population at large. MSF has not been allowed to conduct its own nutritional survey. Furthermore, MSF cannot, given these caveats, evaluate whether this kind of feeding centre is a solution or even part-solution to the broader nutritional problems. Perhaps most worrying of all is that MSF noted that, particularly in South Pyongan, not only were children being brought to the feeding centres from an unknown location or institution, but also these children displayed levels of malnutrition and psychological disturbance suggesting their living conditions were extremely poor. Again, MSF were refused information which might help to alleviate such an alarming situation.

New Nutritional Survey, 1998

In September 1998, a protocol for a new nutrition and MICS (multi-indicator cluster survey) to be undertaken by a joint WFP, UNICEF, EU team of national and international experts was drawn up with the government. Unlike the previous survey, this household survey, based on the selection of children between six months and seven years who were weighed and measured. The sampling excluded 82 counties to which access was not granted; thus the sample selection was based on 130 counties or 71 per cent of the country's population in 61 per cent of all counties.

A sample 3,600 households were drawn for the study. The government provided the teams with a pre-selected list of 30 counties (from 11 provinces) and four Ri/Dongs within each county, based on the information that all Ris consist of about 1,000 households and all Dongs have about 1,500 households. This gave a total of 120 clusters for the survey. The randomness of the survey was achieved by allowing the teams to select 30 households from the list of all Ri/Dong households within the cluster. The selection was to be made the evening prior to the visit so that the authorities would advise those families to remain at home the following day.

The results of the survey showed that acute malnutrition (moderate and severe wasting) affected approximately 16 per cent of children. Chronic malnutrition (moderate and severe stunting) affected another 62 per cent. Concerns were expressed over the fact that children not in households (that is, in hospitals/institutions etc) were not included, and therefore it was not possible to ascertain whether children at home were worse/better off. No cross-reference could be made with data from UNICEF or MSF, for instance. It was also impossible to know whether the households visited were indeed those selected by the team (WFP, 1998).

In spite of these problems, the survey results showed worrying levels of malnutrition within the child population. This indicates that the emergency is far from over and that the whole population of children seems to have been affected by the crisis. Moreover, the high levels of stunting and underweight among older children indicates that food shortages have prevailed over time, including the period before aid agencies entered the country.

7

Food Aid, Economic Stabilisation and Political Agendas

In so far as priorities have shifted from the specific to the general, from natural to complex emergency, and from conjunctural to structural analysis, the objectives of the food aid programme are located within a wider set of priorities which point to the political economy of the region as a whole. Thus North Korea presents a unique opportunity to raise fundamental questions about the role of food aid in the pursuit of socioeconomic stability in politically unified and highly militarised societies in Asia, where indicators of 'complex emergency' are not easily comparable to those used elsewhere in the world. The dilemma for the WFP and NGOs is the extent to which they allow themselves to be used as a vehicle for the mass import of food for stability. The US government alone provided 500,000mt in 1998, primarily through the WFP – perhaps an uncomfortable reminder of who pays the piper.

As mentioned earlier, regional actors – China, Japan and South Korea – continue to support the North Korean economy with concessional trade agreements and food aid. The remaining question is the extent to which the international community is able and willing to supplement this with a medium-term aid programme in line with North Korean government priorities. Apart from the emergency aid programme, commitments to date have been disappointing. Only about US$3m dollars have been committed so far by international donors to the ambitious target of a US$300m dollar contribution for the Agricultural Recovery and Environmental Programme (AREP, detailed below); it has been considerably easier to release short-term emergency funds as a temporary response to what is clearly a long-term structural crisis.

Food for Work Programme

Rehabilitation and reconstruction elements of the existing aid programme have been dogged with many of the familiar problems of access and monitoring. In line with most of its international food aid efforts, WFP sought to address general food shortages through a food for work programme (FFW), which also began to tackle some of the infrastructural damage identified by the government. In 1998 the WFP appeal (658,000mt), FFW was the largest single component, accounting for 224,400mt of food commodities. However, by September 1998 only about 72,000mt had actually been disbursed in this manner. FFW activities were intended to provide employment mainly for peri-urban and rural non-agricultural workers in the

under-utilised industrial sectors. Most of the work is in agricultural rehabilitation and reconstruction, including repair to damage inflicted by floods of previous years. The beneficiaries would, as with previous operations, receive food through the PDS centres. Here, ledgers are used to list participants, rations and quantities received.

The entire FFW programme to date has been implemented through the PVO Consortium, a group of eight US NGOs[10] who were initially allotted 75,000mt (donated by the US) to manage FFW programmes on behalf of the WFP. The PVO Consortium began work in late May 1998 in 55 counties in five provinces. By the end of 1998, 57 projects had been undertaken. Most of the projects were reconstruction of coastal sea walls or river embankments.

Of the 57 approved projects, work progress and food distribution in only 12 had been monitored by August 1998. Some interesting detail has emerged from these visits. The FDRC granted access to each project site three times, once for assessment purposes and twice to monitor progress. No random or surprise visits were permitted; work schedules of the Consortium and field visits were entirely outside their control. Consortium members also had no technical or programmatic support role to play in project design or development.

The resulting FFW project monitoring report for the PVOs comprised three distinct components and interviews for each took place at three different locations. First, general progress was noted by interviewing project managers on site and by observation. Second, interviews were conducted (in a very stilted manner with little spontaneity) with at least one worker on site. Third, workers' attendance logs and records of receipts and distribution were examined at county warehouses/ distribution centres.

The PVO Consortium commented on the extraordinary ability of the authorities to mobilise large numbers of people at short notice to undertake construction projects. However, they were unable to verify whether the actual distribution criteria for FFW were upheld according to the work norms presented on paper.[11] Clearly, the FFW programme was not aimed at distinct vulnerable groups; rather, the workers seemed for the most part to be idle or semi-idle industrial labourers. At least 50 per cent were women. No child labour or elderly labour was observed.

The PVO team experienced delays in receiving visas, an argument over whether all eight had the right to remain in country until the completion of projects in October, and a constant threat of removal of tenure in the country if shipments of food were delayed. The sheer size of the food programme and only a five-month period in which to complete the work put enormous constraints on the team. Project visits were brief, project sites could sometimes be up to 20km long, and vehicles and staff were limited. On several occasions the FDRC admitted that the priority was to get food to deficit counties; therefore, projects of marginal or relatively less importance to future agricultural productivity were promoted simply because they were in areas of critical food shortage.

Vulnerability and Targeting within the Food for Work Programme

On a positive note, the PVO Consortium commented on both the commitment of FDRC officials to meet the work schedule for FFW projects and the relatively good access enjoyed by Consortium staff. Conceptually, FFW is an acceptable and welcome approach to alleviating food shortages for the general population. Within logistical constraints, FDRC staff assigned to the PVO Consortium have striven to achieve targets for project appraisal and monitoring. Operational 'political' difficulties, however, have occurred at Pyongyang level with higher officials clearly uncomfortable with the presence of US agencies on the ground.

It should be stressed, however, that FFW in North Korea is not 'self-targeting' of vulnerability (because there is no voluntary selection of workers); it is simply an additional means of general distribution. Although some international agencies choose targeted geographical areas or sectors within the population, the food aid is not additional to the PDS distribution even though it may create a relatively better warehouse supply. The PVO Consortium regret that their access and monitoring of such projects gives them no further clues about the general food situation in the counties visited. Unless these activities are closely coordinated with other agency inputs and observations in the same areas, food security issues cannot be addressed.[12]

As well as food distribution, project design and implementation are firmly in the hands of government officials. For simple reconstruction of

flood-damaged sea walls and agricultural irrigation projects, this is not itself a problem. However, if FFW is to be extended to more sophisticated or integrated agricultural schemes the lack of consultation will become highly problematic.

Agricultural Rehabilitation

In North Korea, agriculture and politics are inextricably linked. Cereal self-sufficiency is still a central plank of the *juche* philosophy. The country's relatively small agricultural sector bears witness to decades of intensive mechanised farming in the attempt to extract maximum yields from a relatively small amount of arable land. Production peaked in the early 1980s when 75,000 tractors were in use and 650,000 tonnes of fertiliser imported per year. By 1998, due to fuel and spare-parts shortages, only 20 per cent of the tractors were in use and under 300,000 tonnes of fertiliser was available. In addition to fuel constraints, lack of power to pump water for irrigation was noted by FAO/WFP as an impediment to timely planting in 1998.

The international community has, especially in the three years of emergency inputs and field presence, a deeper understanding than ever before of how the macroeconomic environment affects prospects for investment in agriculture and how agricultural production must be inseparable from environmental protection. In May 1998, a Round Table meeting convened by UNDP and the North Korean government opened a dialogue on development and recovery issues which was to break the 'natural disaster' mould of the previous three years. The background to this meeting was the collation of national statistics and indicators generally accepted as accurate and which confirm the structural and chronic nature of the crisis.

The AREP Round Table led to a provisional programme. It proposes that with US$1.7m from the North Korean government and US$300m from the international community agricultural self-sufficiency could be restored and domestic food production revived for the marketing year November 2000–October 2001. The US$300m contribution from the international community would consist of:

- infrastructure rehabilitation and farmland recovery (US$93m);
- modernisation and operation of two fertiliser plants (US$93m);
- extension of the double-cropping initiative (US$99m);
- reforestation (US$5m);
- capacity-building (US$10m).

The details of the programme are beyond the scope of this paper. In essence, it is an attempt to deal with the medium-term rehabilitation needs of the country while lessening the dependency on food aid. Yet the response to AREP must be one of cautious optimism with a substantial dose of realism. It is highly unlikely that North Korea will achieve long-term food self-sufficiency. According to the AREP assessments, grain production will have to reach 6.5mt produced on only 1.4 million hectares (ha) of arable land by 1999–2000. This requires an increase of productivity from the current level of 2.5–3mt ha to 4.6mt.[13] It will require a massive input of seed, fertilisers and agro-chemicals to produce such yields, bought with hard currency the country cannot generate from its depleted industries. The rehabilitation of North Korea's own fertiliser producing facilities is not a sufficient answer; for this in turn requires hugely expensive refurbishment of the energy industry (mostly from coal fired electricity generating stations). And industrial development requires investment which will only come from overseas if and when major economic and political reforms are underway.

Meanwhile, double cropping (with barley) has provided something of a medium-term pragmatic approach to improve the local production of cereals. With international assistance the amount of land under double cropping has risen from 38,000ha in 1997 to 70,000ha in 1998. Its long-term viability is precarious, however, not only because of continued dependence on agro-chemicals but also because of the consequences for soil fertility.

Crop diversification, coupled with soil conservation, may hold the answer to at least the possibility of generating foreign currency through exported produce. However, concern was expressed by WFP at the AREP meeting that an exclusive focus on agricultural rehabilitation obscured the reality of humanitarian assistance needs in at least the next two years. National food deficits are set to continue and the benefits of agricultural rehabilitation are unlikely to be felt in the short term. There must, therefore, be a concomitant role for food aid, requiring an integrated approach using FFW as a central component of rehabilitation work, while simultaneously paying due attention to levels of vulnerability within particular population groups.

Confused Strategies: WFP–EU Relationship

Insofar as the government's priorities have been to obtain the maximum tonnage of food aid to offset national deficits, the WFP has been the key agency and primary negotiating body for the international community. Its unique position in this respect has not been without problems, particularly with those agencies wishing to tread the fine line between quantity and quality while trying to gradually persuade the government to realign its agricultural policy. In theory, the AREP process opened the dialogue, at least at macro-level; meanwhile agencies on the ground are still dealing exclusively with the FDRC with its singular approach to obtaining food and medical commodities.

The EU contributed 65,000mt to the WFP appeal in 1997, as well as 95,000mt as bilateral food aid delivered through NGOs. It raised concerns over the relative weight given to food aid rather than rehabilitation activities within the 1998 UN Consolidated Appeal. Since the EU was having simultaneous discussions with Pyongyang about agricultural rehabilitation and addressing some of the structural issues inherent in the food security crisis, the sheer quantity of food 'acquired' by the government through the UN appeal may have undermined these discussions.

Following a May 1998 mission, the EU has made no further food aid pledges (beyond its own 86,000mt bilateral donation for the year, and a smaller contribution of 32,800mt to the WFP appeal) pending an assessment of the 1998 harvest. This is partly because of the above reservations, but also because the EU is interested in engaging the government in a strategy which questions existing agricultural policy. For instance, conditionalities on EU fertiliser inputs include an agreement to increase incentives for individual householders on cooperative farms by enabling them to have an increased allocation of land for private production to be sold at deregulated markets. Contrary to one of the proposals put to AREP, the UN-led plan, the rehabilitation of fertiliser factories alone was not regarded as useful without the overhaul of incentive schemes and market policy.

In the cat and mouse game of agency/government relations in Pyongyang, it could be argued that the EU's reduction of its food aid programme in 1998 was detrimental to the interests of 'soft target' NGOs dependent for their presence on the dollar value of imports. Some are concerned that the agriculture rehabilitation strategy, if pursued without the backing of substantial 'tangible' food commodities, will embroil agencies in drawn out debates with Pyongyang while security authorities simply cancel visas.

8

Inter-Agency Coordination

All agencies have recognised the importance of a unified and coordinated approach to humanitarian assistance in North Korea, not least because of the difficulties associated with negotiating operational agreements with the government. The dearth of reliable, cross-referenced information and analysis is a key feature of, and obstacle to, effective delivery of assistance. Although information exchange at field level appears to work well, this is not reflected at the level of international donors and decision-makers. Too often, poor information and analysis – in part driven by fundraising priorities – has created stark differences in approach between major donors. There is no facility for collating and analysing the best available information from the (comparatively few) agencies on the ground – though this has been done in Africa through the Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN) model which might be replicated in North Korea, reporting through the Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Between July and December 1997 the presence of resident international organisations increased dramatically. In addition to UN organisations and the IFRC, six NGOs opened offices in 1997: Children's Aid Direct, Concern Worldwide, Cooperazione e Sviluppo, German Agro Action, MDM and MSF. The number of residential NGOs increased by a further four in 1998: Action Internationale Contre la Faim, Help Age International, Oxfam and Committee Kap Anamur. By October 1998 the number had dropped to eight, with MDM and MSF having left under protest. In addition, the food security unit of the European Commission (DGVIII), ECHO and the Swiss government's Disaster Relief Unit established residential missions in 1997.

As a complement to its emergency programme, WFP in Pyongyang established and housed the Food Aid Liaison Unit (FALU) as a facilitator and coordinator for the receipt and distribution of food and non-food items on behalf of NGOs which do not have resident officers in North Korea. These are either donated to the WFP emergency appeal or else go solely through FALU, the latter usually being theoretically allocated to specific beneficiaries (elderly, pregnant/lactating women, school children, etc) in designated geographical areas. Agencies such as Action Churches Together (ACT), Caritas, Canadian Food Grain Bank and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) deliver high value commodities such as edible oil, high energy milk and sugar, as well as

the traditional donations of wheat, rice, maize and lentils through FALU. From January to July 1998 approximately 30,000mt of such commodities were distributed through FALU, monitored through a combination of WFP staff, visiting missions and implementing resident NGOs.

By the end of 1998 there were approximately 100 expatriates in the country. Such a small community enjoyed regular leisure as well as business contacts and inter-agency coordination has benefited accordingly. Formal mechanisms have expanded according to demand and the increased number of agencies. In September 1997, a coordination group (UN agencies, IFRC, NGOs, bilateral and multilateral institutions) chaired by the UN resident coordinator was supplemented by a food aid sectoral group (WFP-led), a health group (UNICEF-led), an agricultural group (EU-led), and a health working group (for new initiatives, led by WHO). In October 1997, the UN's Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group, on recognising that North Korea now constituted a complex emergency, recommended the appointment of a humanitarian coordinator (HC). In December, the WFP country director was thus appointed as resident HC.

In early 1998, OCHA submitted a plan to the government for regular policy oriented and operational coordination meetings to be held with the FDRC, chaired jointly by the FDRC and the UN HC. These would include heads of each member of the humanitarian team in North Korea (UN, NGOs, inter-governmental organisations). The plan is still pending a decision from the government. For their part, the NGOs meet regularly in an informal NGO forum.

9

Humanitarian Principles, Standards and Accountability

This paper has examined some of the dilemmas and pitfalls of the massive emergency food and health programme undertaken by the international community over three years. In some respects the North Korean government could be charged with a cynical disregard for international standards of accountability, yet the question remains: who's standards? Aid agencies have rarely suggested food aid abuse as such. There is no evidence to suggest that food is, or is not, delivered according to the distribution plans. Where anomalies have occurred, government officials have tacitly admitted shortcomings in their administration, though they have not welcomed any close examination of these shortcomings. It is precisely this 'blind alley' which continues to thwart the UN and NGO efforts in accountability. A senior agency staff member sums it up thus: 'It is all bad faith beyond the port. We are only regarded as an unwelcome policeman with a foreign agenda. National pride is so intense that any attempt at tracking commodities, monitoring distribution or enquiring about family food security are seen as an embarrassing infringement of conduct by foreigners.'

Concerns over quality information, access and monitoring have provoked a coordinated effort by UN and NGOs to head off their own critics while simultaneously presenting a united front in negotiations with the government. This has entailed, among other things, a reiteration of commonly agreed principles. A draft statement of humanitarian principles prepared for the 1999 Consolidated Appeal for North Korea, for instance, comprises the following elements:

- knowledge about the overall humanitarian situation in the country according to assessed needs;
- assurance that humanitarian assistance reaches sectors of the population in greatest need;
- access for assessment, monitoring and evaluation;
- distribution of assistance only to areas where access is granted;
- protection of the humanitarian interests of the population;
- support to local capacity-building;
- beneficiary participation in programme planning and implementation;
- adequate capacity in terms of international staff.

Although these principles may, and should, move donors and operational agencies towards greater consensus they are, like the Red Cross Code of

Conduct, a template for voluntary adherence. If they are not formally represented and detailed in written contracts with the government their purpose will be mainly for guidance and not strict adherence. Nevertheless, it should be recalled that several NGOs (MSF, MDM and others) had written their own 'memoranda of understanding' agreements with Pyongyang which forbade their sharing of information and data with other international agencies. It is precisely this kind of divide and rule tactic which may be avoided with a consensual principled approach.

The strategy so far adopted by OCHA and humanitarian actors on the ground is one of constructive engagement – that is, a quest to establish benchmarks against which to measure progress. Periodic reviews will take place in the coming two years which will look at the extent to which the principles have been acknowledged and adhered to.

Efforts to strengthen the framework in which humanitarian assistance programmes take place include the widely accepted Code of Conduct (RRN, 1994) as well as the development of technical standards through the Sphere Project. Reference to the 'Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards' of the Sphere Project (The Sphere Project, 1998) is instructive with regard to some of the dilemmas facing aid agencies in North Korea. The charter specifically commits signatory agencies to defined minimum standards for the provision of humanitarian services; in doing so, they ensure a minimum system of accountability.

This paper cannot go into a detailed analysis of food aid standards measured against performance in North Korea. However, it is worth noting those areas where minimum standards (set by the Sphere Project, and reiterated in UN and NGO literature and field guidance) have been wholly or partially compromised in North Korea:

- Before any programme decisions were made there was not a demonstrated understanding of the basic conditions which created the risk of food insecurity, particularly with respect to food availability and people's access to it, nutritional information, and so on (Sphere Project, Analysis Standard 1).

- Systems were not in place to ensure that the performance and effectiveness of the food aid programme – and its changes over time – were adequately monitored and evaluated (Sphere Project, Analysis Standard 2).

- The people who receive food aid did not have the opportunity to participate in the design, management and monitoring of the programme (Sphere Project, Food Aid Standard 1).

- Food aid commodities and programme funds were not managed, tracked and accounted for using a transparent system which could be adequately audited (Sphere Project, Food Aid Standard 4).

- In spite of the huge quantities concerned, it has been impossible to verify whether food aid distribution is fair and equitable. Recipients are, as far as agencies know, neither informed of their ration entitlement nor of the rationale for the levels provided (Sphere Project, Food Aid Standard 6).

North Korea is not unique in having humanitarian principles undermined by practical and political constraints. Neither is it unique in presenting the crucial dichotomy between visible human needs and the poor accountability of intermediary delivery agents. Yet, unlike those countries characterised primarily by violent conflict and a disintegrating polity, so many of these principles in North Korea could be achieved through a better understanding of the appropriate balance between government and aid agency responsibilities.

NGOs are in a relatively weak position with regard to negotiating access and programmatic terms. In the build up to the 1999 Consolidated Appeal for North Korea, consensus was reached within the UN family that they should continue to push for the upholding of humanitarian principles (which will be outlined in the 1999 CAP) rather than negotiating 'rules of engagement' as such. Although some NGOs might have preferred rules of engagement, they recognised that their status in the country would improve if they are brought more fully under the UN umbrella as implementing partners and therefore were willing to accept the compromise.

A word of caution over the applicability of the Sphere standards has already come from some French NGOs (RRN, 1998). They have noted the inconsistency between advocating for participatory approaches while at the same time promoting

prescriptive and imposed standards. Participation and local adaptation of the standards are central planks of the Sphere process, one in which national actors – which also, presumably, includes governments – are invited to apply the standards to a changing and complex environment. Beyond formal conventions and law, there is a whole area of debate in which quality assistance and the 'right to intervene' (that is, *our* right) stands in stark contrast to the rules of sovereignty. In North Korea, the Sphere standards may be a useful benchmark from which to measure whether we should, by our own standards, have poured so much money into a barely accountable aid programme. It is unlikely, however, that they can be used as an effective lobbying tool with the government.

One clear message emerges from inter-agency debates over the last 12 months: the North Korean government will continue to exploit differences between agencies to their advantage and are fully appraised of differences of opinion emanating from New York, Brussels, Rome or elsewhere. In particular, they are aware of the tensions inherent in a food aid strategy which, on the one hand, posits 'food for stability' (ergo, quantity) and on the other hand demands international accountability (ergo, quality). If one traces the pattern of food aid contributions from the US, for instance, there is to date no evidence of donor fatigue. Indeed, given the coincidence of a US bumper harvest in 1998 and the renewed urgency for political stability in the Korean peninsula, one might speculate that heightened concerns over food aid accountability are as inconvenient to Washington as they are to Pyongyang.

Critics from the 'Asian values' school of thought have suggested that, in fact, considering its previous isolation and hard-line political hue, Pyongyang has already opened up the country to aid agencies in an unprecedented fashion. The problem may not be so much humanitarian principles per se as the manner in which they are negotiated. To the government, it was, for instance, both incomprehensible and unforgivable that MSF, on withdrawing from North Korea in 1998, should so publicly have criticised its host based on universalist notions and the tenets of self-proclaimed 'advocacy'. Come what may, a united, fully coordinated and consensual approach to humanitarian standards in North Korea must go hand in hand with quiet diplomacy and tangible proof of long-term commitment, rather than 'quick hit' humanitarianism.

Notes

1. AFP and ABC news reports, September/October 1998, quote Washington sources as stating that the supply of extra food to the starving nation of North Korea is contingent upon the (now agreed) resumption of peace talks in Washington in October.
2. It should be noted that these FAO estimates have been revised downwards over time (in June 1997) from government figures. Yet the above analysis still holds.
3. I am indebted to Aiden Foster-Carter for this story, submitted to Asia Wall Street Journal, 6 April 1998, in an article entitled 'How North Korea Limps Along'.
4. 25% costs would be paid once consignment notes had been satisfactorily completed for the first stage (discharge of the shipment), then a further 25% once the whole set of consignment notes (from each stage along the path to delivery) had been received at the WFP Country Office. The remaining 50% was to be paid following an analysis of these documents.
5. This information was provided by Oxfam UK from a number of their July–October 1997 reports and personal interviews with the author.
6. Children's Aid Direct found this in delivering clothes (manufactured in Pyongyang) to child institutions.
7. Paraphrased from a remark by a senior official to CARITAS; see Kathi Zelliweger, 'North Korea: The Need for a Humanitarian Response', CARITAS-Hong Kong, August 1997.
8. Canadian North Korea donors tour report, November 1997.
9. PVO is a common US term for NGO.
10. CARE, Catholic Relief Services, World Vision International, Amigos Internacionales, Mercy Corps, and other smaller PVOs.
11. The work norm for most projects assumes the workers ability to move one-half cubic metre of material (dirt/rocks) per day, for a 6–8 hour day, and for a ration of 2 kgper person.
12. Interviews with the author, November 1998.
13. Internal report provided by Children's Aid Direct.

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Abbreviations

ACT	Action Churches Together
ADRA	Adventist Development and Relief Agency
AREP	Agricultural Recovery and Environmental Protection
CAP	Consolidated Appeals Process
CMC	Central Military Commission
CSB	corn soya blend
CTBT	Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty
ECHO	European Community Humanitarian Office
EU	European Union
FALU	Food Aid Liaison Service
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
FDRC	Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee
FFW	Food for Work
HC	Humanitarian Coordinator
HEM	high energy milk
IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross
IRIN	Integrated Regional Information Network
KWP	Korean Workers' Party
LOU	Letter of Understanding
MFA	Ministry of Food Administration
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OCHA	Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs
PDS	Public Distribution System
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Childrens' Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation
WFP	World Food Programme

Glossary of Terms

chon	local North Korean currency
Dong	provincial sub-division in the urban areas
juche	the philosophy of self-reliance
Pyongsong	South Pyongyang
Ri	provincial sub-division in the rural areas

RRN

Background

The Relief and Rehabilitation Network was conceived in 1993 and launched in 1994 as a mechanism for professional information exchange in the expanding field of humanitarian aid. The need for such a mechanism was identified in the course of research undertaken by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) on the changing role of NGOs in relief and rehabilitation operations, and was developed in consultation with other Networks operated within ODI. Since April 1994 the RRN has produced publications in three different formats, in French and English: Good Practice Reviews, Network Papers and Newsletters. The RRN is now in its second three-year phase (1996–1999), supported by four new donors: DANIDA, SIDA (Sweden), the Department of Foreign Affairs (Ireland), and the Department for International Development (UK). Over the three year phase the RRN will seek to expand its reach and relevance amongst humanitarian agency personnel, and to further promote good practice.

Objective

To improve aid policy and practice as it is applied in complex political emergencies.

Purpose

To contribute to individual and institutional learning by encouraging the exchange and dissemination of information relevant to the professional development of those engaged in the provision of humanitarian assistance.

Activities

To commission, publish and disseminate analysis and reflection on issues of good practice in policy and programming in humanitarian operations, primarily in the form of written publications, in both French and English.

Target audience

Individuals and organisations actively engaged in the provision of humanitarian assistance at national and international, field-based and head office level in the ‘North’ and ‘South’.

The Relief and Rehabilitation Network is supported by:

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
DANIDA

SIDA

Department of Foreign Affairs,
Ireland

DFID